



## Vernonia Acquisition and Elevations

### Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

#### *Columbia County, Oregon*

**Vernonia, OR** - Following an extended period of unseasonably cold weather and heavy snowfall in the Pacific Northwest, warming temperatures and rain began thawing the snowpack and frozen rivers throughout Oregon. Streams rose quickly and reached flood stage in many locations. At least 25 Oregon rivers reached flood stage. Mudslides, avalanches in the mountain passes, and road washouts also occurred in many parts of the State. Extensive earth movement was experienced in many areas, including landslides, stream bank erosion, and significant amounts of sediment transport.



Initial assessments prepared by the counties reported an estimated \$280 million of damage, of which one-third was to private property, and the remainder was to public property. On February 8, 1996, Governor Kithaber declared a State of Emergency for 18 counties within Oregon. By February 9, 1996, a Federal disaster was declared for a total of 27 counties.

In Oregon, the City was aware that a significant number of the structures proposed to be elevated as part of the hazard mitigation project were within the floodway. The City's flood hazard ordinance identifies specific requirements for structures within the floodway. The objective of the acquisition and elevation project was to bring all substantially damaged residences into compliance with the FEMA flood insurance requirements. The best alternative taken was to rapidly implement the program to prevent property damage from recurring within Vernonia's floodways and floodplains at the lowest possible cost and within the quickest timeframe.

The City first worked from a prioritized list of properties to acquire located within the floodway and to elevate houses two feet above floodplain level. In order to inform citizens of the hazard mitigation process, a project manager was hired to gather input and hold a number of public meetings. In addition to these meetings, an Unmet Needs committee was formed to address and focus specifically on mitigation. Presentations were given identifying the planning process, floodway/floodplain definitions, and criteria for home elevations. Citizens were given the opportunity to ask questions and provide input on flood prevention measures through a survey process. The City sent letters to property owners with a return form to confirm interest in the mitigation project.

The majority of residents whose homes were substantially damaged could not afford to elevate their homes. In early 1996, Vernonia was less than two percentage points away from a citywide low-to-moderate income rating. To address the financial needs of this community, the City met with the Oregon Emergency Services, FEMA and Oregon Economic Development.

All of the structures proposed for acquisition are located within the floodway along the Nehalem River. Floodways serve as a natural drainage area as rivers fill to their maximum capacity. Moving the structures out of the floodway would allow water to move freely along its natural course. This in turn will decrease water velocity which would lessen erosion damage.

Standard Homeowner's insurance policies do not cover flood damage. The National Flood Insurance Program makes Federally backed flood insurance available to homeowners, renters, and business owners in participating communities.

#### Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **Single County in a State**

FEMA Region: **Region X**

State: **Oregon**

County: **Columbia County**

City/Community: **Vernonia**

### Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Public**  
Hazard Type: **Flooding**  
Activity/Project Type: **Acquisition/Buyouts; Elevation, Structural; Education/Outreach/Public Awareness**  
Activity/Project Start Date: **08/1996**  
Activity/Project End Date: **06/1999**  
Funding Source: **Hazard Mitigation Technical Assistance Program (HMTAP); Homeowner**  
Funding Recipient: **Local Government**  
Funding Recipient Name: **City of Vernonia**

### Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **\$750,000.00 (Actual)**

### Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal Disaster? **Yes**  
Federal Disaster #: **1099 , 02/09/1996**  
Value Tested By Disaster? **Unknown**  
Repetitive Loss Property? **Unknown**

### Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: **<http://www.fema.gov/business/nfip/>**  
Reference URL 2: **<http://www.floodsmart.gov/>**

### Main Points

- The City's flood hazard ordinance identifies specific requirements for structures within the floodway.
- In order to inform citizens of the hazard mitigation process, a project manager was hired to gather input and hold a number of public meetings. In addition to these meetings, an Unmet Needs committee was formed to address and focus specifically on mitigation.
- Moving the structures out of the floodway would allow water to move freely along its natural course. This in turn will decrease water velocity which would lessen erosion damage.

